

For [The Palm Beach Post](#)

By U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney

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When our Founders signed the Constitution, we were already in debt from the Revolutionary War, and we have remained in debt almost ever since. Unique to the past decade, however, is the explosion in our national debt due to skyrocketing deficits and out-of-control spending.

Both parties are to blame. At the end of fiscal year 2000, the national debt was \$5.65 trillion. By the end of fiscal year 2008, it had reached \$10 trillion. Believe it or not, we can look back on those years as the "good old days" of fiscal responsibility, because less than three years later, the debt stands at nearly \$14.3 trillion, and it's climbing rapidly. Interest payments alone for 2011 are expected to total \$196 billion.

Since both parties are responsible for our debt crisis, we need a solution that transcends party politics and election-year promises. We need a solution that will force not just this Congress and this president but future Congresses and presidents to enact responsible budgets. We need to change the way Washington works and the way it spends your money. We need a balanced budget amendment.

An amendment would ensure that we never face a debt crisis like we do today. It would show the American people that we're ready to be responsible stewards of their tax dollars.

The massive borrowing by the federal government is hurting economic growth. Fearing the higher taxes, inflation and borrowing costs of a looming debt crisis, businesses are hunkering down, and job creation has stalled. A balanced budget amendment would give the private sector certainty.

Opponents ask, Can't Congress and the president already balance the budget? Yes, but history has shown that the ability has not translated into action. For the most part, people want lower taxes, but they don't want to lose spending programs they like. For example, few would dispute that Medicare and Social Security are on fiscally unsustainable paths, yet most begin to squirm when specific reforms are proposed. Even spending projects that you and I might find wasteful have a bloc of committed supporters.

Politicians typically have bowed to this public pressure, finding it easy to reduce taxes but difficult to cut spending. This is our political reality: Government spending is almost impossible to cut, especially when government is divided between Republicans and Democrats.

A balanced budget amendment would challenge this system head-on by forcing Congress and the president to spend no more than they take in through taxes. No more avoiding tough decisions. No more ducking responsibility and blaming the other party. And, most important, no more deficits.

That is why I am co-sponsoring HJR 2, which would amend the Constitution to require a balanced budget. Our proposal makes common-sense exceptions for times of declared war, and would allow Congress in times of emergencies to override the requirement with a three-fifths vote in the House and Senate. It would also require a three-fifths vote in both houses to raise the debt limit. The amendment would go into effect two years after ratification, giving Congress time to balance its budget in a responsible way.

Amending the Constitution requires a two-thirds vote in the House and Senate, followed by ratification of three-fourths of the states, 49 of which require balanced budgets. In 1995, a balanced-budget amendment passed the House but fell one vote short in the Senate.

This week, we get another chance, when the House takes up this amendment. Given the long-standing support that a balanced budget amendment has had from both sides of the aisle, I hope that Democrats and Republicans will send a message that we are ready to get our fiscal house in order.

Editor's note: Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, represents Florida's 16th Congressional District.